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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000466

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/27/2009

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SUBJECT: IRAN'S "BRAIN DRAIN": A SNAPSHOT FROM SHARIF  
UNIVERSITY

REF: BAKU 773

Classified By: Acting Principal Officer Sandra Oudkirk; Reason 1.5 (d)

1. (C) Summary and comment: We spoke recently with several students from Iran's prestigious Sharif University of Technology who are headed to the U.S. for graduate/PhD studies. The students shared their views on Sharif's academic competitiveness and student body; described their reliance on the internet and cell phones for information-gathering and social networking; and characterized Sharif as a far less political campus than Tehran and Amir Kabir Universities ("we're too busy studying"). They assessed that the lack of good jobs and stable professional futures in Iran combined with the Iranian regime's indifference towards them (as contrasted with the interest of top western universities in recruiting them), is persuading up to 90% of them to seek advanced study abroad, with little interest in returning to Iran afterwards. We were struck that so many of Iran's brightest students, when confronted with the choice of staying in Iran and working to effect gradual change, or leaving to find a better life elsewhere, choose the latter. While it remains in the USG's strong interest to continue to support the desire of students like these to seek PhD opportunities abroad, it is unfortunate that so many of Iran's brightest students feel no stake in trying to effect positive change at home. End summary and comment.

2. (SBU) Consulate Istanbul's "Iran Watcher" met with several undergraduate students from Tehran's Sharif University of Science and Technology over the past two weeks, to seek their views on why so many Sharif students are seeking to pursue graduate or doctoral programs abroad and on conditions facing university students in Iran. These students had applied for and received U.S. student visas in Istanbul, and will be attending graduate and/or PhD programs at Harvard, UCLA, UC Riverside, and University of Pennsylvania. The students, all of whom had read an August 9, 2008 article in "Newsweek" about Sharif University's growing worldwide reputation for educating exceptionally gifted science students, were eager to share their views with a U.S. diplomat.

A Snapshot from Sharif University  
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3. (SBU) "The most competitive program in the world": The students we spoke with were studying electrical engineering, chemical engineering, and computer sciences at Sharif. They all took the university entrance exam (the "konkur") in 2003 or 2004, and all scored within the top 200 out of the 500,000 Iranian students who took it each of those two years. According to our interlocutors, to get accepted into the electrical engineering department at Sharif, a student typically must score within the top 100 of all students taking the exam; to get into chemical engineering, one must

score in the top 150, and to get into computer sciences, in the top 200. The computer sciences student, on the basis of her top 200 score, was also offered a space in Tehran University's electrical engineering program -- her preferred field -- but accepted Sharif's offer of a computer sciences degree instead because of Sharif's reputation. An electrical engineering student told us that the department head reinforces to his students at every opportunity that that program is "the most competitive university engineering program in the world." According to these students, the pressure to score well on the konkur is correspondingly intense, with "konkur preparation classes" becoming a burgeoning industry in Iran, "like your Kaplan or Princeton Review courses, except in Iran more than half the companies offering these classes are just scamming students for money." They had all taken konkur review courses from reputable companies, and agreed that students who cannot afford to do so are at a distinct disadvantage.

¶4. (SBU) Impressions of the curriculum and workload: The students found the undergraduate workload heavy but not impossible, and the quality of the classes heavily dependent on each professor's own publications, expertise, and academic connections outside Iran. In the sciences departments, each student took only a few elective courses throughout their undergraduate studies, but when they did they made sure to sign up for courses taught by professors with track records of publication in western journals, as that tended to correlate with the professor being more "up to date" and having more access to western teaching materials. They also gravitated towards professors with reputations for helping their students publish. One student took issue with the

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recent "Newsweek" article claim that Iranians had been banned until only recently from publishing in the prestigious journals of the "Institute for Electrical and Electronic Engineers" (IEEE), showing several of her published IEEE articles from 2006-8. According to an electrical engineering student, Sharif students publish more scientific articles in peer review journals, by far, than any other Iranian university. "This is one of the benefits that Sharif offers, which makes us appealing to western graduate schools and PhD programs," he said.

¶5. (SBU) Sharif's student body and student life: According to these students, because Sharif was modeled on MIT and Sharif's overall approach has not been "meddled with" too drastically by the Iranian government, campus life at Sharif felt closer to a "western campus experience" than any other Iranian university could provide. These students were active members, for example, of extracurricular clubs like mountain climbing, photography, computer gaming, and music. They described the student body as weighted demographically towards Iran's wealthier urbanites, especially from Tehran, Yazd, Mashhad, and Esfahan, and as primarily ethnic Persian, though they all noted they had Azeri classmates as well. There were also a few Iranian-Kurdish and Ahwaz Arab students, but they tended to keep to themselves. Male and female students mingled easily, though female students, according to one, are not allowed the same opportunities as male students (at Sharif or elsewhere), especially regarding participation in academic competitions abroad. One female student was initially denied permission to participate in a 2006 robotics competition in Germany because the university was not willing to send an official chaperone "to protect her virtue", but Sharif relented when her family agreed to send her older sister to go with her, at the family's expense. "That kind of thing happens all the time," another female student agreed, "whether going to a professor's office hours, or using the computer lab, unless the female students go together as a group, we find many doors are closed to us."

¶6. (SBU) Internet and cell-phones: The students told us they spend considerable time using Sharif's broadband

internet access to surf the web, mostly to track down scientific research, read news, and keep up with social networking sites. They felt the effects of Iranian government internet filtering, which became much more noticeable in 2005-6, corresponding to the Ahmadinejad government's periodic crackdowns on civil society and social freedoms. Even so, one surmised that the Iranian government imposed fewer restrictions and/or less rigorous filtering of Sharif students' internet usage than on other Iranian universities' students. As an example, he said that at the Sharif computer labs, one can usually access the social networking site "Facebook", a site that is largely off-limits to most Iranians (and was inaccessible from Sharif's internet portals last year). But for more immediate social networking, all the students we spoke to relied primarily on cell-phone text messaging, usually sending messages in a mixture of Farsi and English to avoid triggering Iranian government electronic text-search monitoring, even for innocuous conversations.

17. (SBU) "Not a hotbed of student radicalism": The students downplayed the role that political activism plays in their daily lives. "Unlike Tehran University or Amir Kabir University, you can come here and avoid politics if you want to." They acknowledged that the Iranian Basiji (a pro-regime paramilitary force that includes students) were present at Sharif, but generally kept a low profile. They were proud of the fact that Sharif University, alone among Iran's top universities, had retained its chancellor, Dr. Saed Sohrabpour, throughout the Ahmadinejad years ("every other university has had its chancellor removed by Ahmadinejad and replaced usually by a cleric lacking in serious academic credentials", they said). However, they also shared the view that Dr. Sohrabpour had aligned himself too closely to Ahmadinejad's government, and that he had not protested enough when, for example, the government asked Sharif to confer honorary degrees on several government officials last year as a reward for loyalty to Ahmadinejad. Although they claimed that "100%" of their classmates, "minus the basiji", were disenchanted with the regime and the Ahmadinejad government in particular, they also acknowledged that Sharif was not a hotbed of student activism, as most students are too busy studying "and trying to get into a good PhD program abroad."

18. (SBU) Why are so many of Sharif's best and brightest studying abroad? We asked for the students' impressions of

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the recent "Newsweek" article's claim that Iran's poor economy and repressive political atmosphere are contributing to the elevated flows of top Iranian students abroad. All agreed wholeheartedly, assessing that some 90% of Sharif graduates seek PhD programs in the west -- especially the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia -- most with the intention of staying and working in those countries. They described the disincentives to staying in Iran as two-fold: "First, there are limited job opportunities even for top students from Sharif, Tehran, and other comparable universities, and those jobs do not offer competitive salaries or job security. Second, many of us feel the economic and political situation here over the next few years will only worsen, because this government is incapable of fixing it." They agreed that as Iran's social policies become more restrictive and repressive, the "brain drain" of top Iranian students moving abroad will probably increase. Added to that is the positive incentive to study abroad: "Top universities in the west want us. They are starting to recruit from Sharif, offering fellowships or scholarships, tenure tracks, and a real professional future."

As one student put it, "the choice is obvious. This government doesn't want us; they say good riddance to us, thinking of us as a nuisance rather than a national resource. Places like Harvard and Stanford seek us out." The students agreed that the Iranian government makes no effort to try to stop Sharif students from studying abroad, with the exception

of charging them USD 900 to collect their diplomas if they cannot demonstrate they have a job or onward graduate studies program in Iran.

¶9. (SBU) Views on elections and sanctions: The students were deeply pessimistic about the Iranian presidential elections next year, predicting that no truly competitive reform candidate would be allowed to run, that their votes would not matter, and that either Ahmadinejad or Tehran Mayor Ghalibaf would win, signaling in either case a continuation of current Iranian policies. "As 'The Who' once said, meet the new boss, same as the old boss." One criticized the international sanctions regime on Iran as "intending to target the government programs the West doesn't like, such as the nuclear and oil programs, but you are dealing with a government that controls almost all economic levers. They easily manipulate the effects of the sanctions to impact the middle class, not themselves." He felt the sanctions regime contributing to the growing corruption in Iran, arguing that "if you haven't yet noticed, there is a direct correlation between the increase of international sanctions and the increase in regime-controlled corruption." As anecdotal evidence, all the students we spoke to owned U.S.-manufactured laptop computers, all imported via Dubai, and all purchased at a substantial mark-up at computer stores in Tehran "owned by the families of government ministers and Pasdaran (IRGC) officers."

¶10. (C) Comment: Given that the students we spoke to represent that top 0.05% of Iranian students in terms of academic achievement, their views may not necessarily reflect those of their wider demographic generation, although their unhappiness with life in Iran tracks closely with the views expressed by many other young Iranian contacts of ours, as well as by the Iranian students with whom Embassy Baku recently met (reftel). We were struck by their conclusion that rather than try to stop a generation of future scientific leaders from leaving, the Iranian government is happy to see them go, a self-spiting tradition dating back to Ayatollah Khomeini's defiant rhetoric in 1979 embracing "brain drain" as a means of "cleansing" Iran. We also found it instructive that when Iran's very brightest students, especially in the self-described "largely non-political" environment of Sharif University, are confronted with the choice of staying in Iran and working within (or beyond) the system to effect gradual change through reform, or leaving to find a better life elsewhere, some 90% choose to pursue the latter. This is simply not a revolutionary bunch. While we believe it remains in the USG's strong interest to continue to encourage and support the desire of students like these to seek PhD opportunities in the United States, it is unfortunate that many of Iran's brightest students have been politically disempowered to the point that they feel no stake in trying to effect positive change at home. End comment.

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